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THE INFLUENCE OF HOUSEMAIDS ON SAUDI YOUNG CHILDREN'S ARABIC LANGUAGE ACQUISITION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MOTHERS

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ABSTRACT

Almost every upper- and middle-class family in Saudi Arabia has a foreign housemaid who does the housework and takes care of the children. This study aims to find out whether foreign housemaids have an impact on children's acquisition of Arabic, the children's first language. Surveys with 300 mothers with children under the age of six revealed that most housemaids speak neither English nor Arabic upon arrival in Saudi Arabia. The housemaids learn to speak Arabic by immersion. However, their language is characterized by faulty pronunciation and grammatical forms, production of incomplete sentences, and limited vocabulary. Mothers surveyed asserted that about half the children imitate the housemaid all the time when they first start to learn to speak Arabic at age two and three years. Those children cannot produce Arabic sounds correctly and make grammatical mistakes, but when they go to kindergarten, traces of foreign accent resulting from imitating the housemaid's foreign Arabic accent disappear, and the child is able to speak Arabic correctly and natively. This means that housemaids have a temporary influence on Saudi children's acquisition of Arabic as the children get older. It seems that the housemaid's influence depends on how much time the child spends with her, how much time the mother spends with the child, and whether the child has siblings and playmates.

KEYWORDS: Housemaids, domestic helpers, child language, language development, first language acquisition, children under 6, Saudi children, acquisition of Arabic.

INTRODUCTION

As in many countries around the world, almost every upper- and middle-class family, especially families with working mothers, in Saudi Arabia has a housemaid. Some affluent families even hire a nanny to take care of the children. Housemaids and/or nannies are recruited from non-Arabic speaking countries such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and some African countries. They are recruited for a two-year term, but once a housemaid's term is over, another housemaid, who might be from a different foreign country, and does not speak Arabic takes over. The housemaid lives at home for twenty-four hours and over weekends and holidays. She does not only do the house chores but takes care of the children since they are babies as well.

As the number of families having a housemaid is increasing in many countries, especially in the Gulf States, there is concern among parents, educators, psychologists, social workers, and other stakeholders about the impact of non-parental childcare on children's physical, emotional, social, and linguistic development, and well-being. Some studies in the literature investigated the effects of housemaids on children's social, emotional, linguistic development and academic achievement. For example, Ma, Chen and Li (2020) explored non-parental childcare in Hong Kong; discrepancies in childcare beliefs and practices; interactions among children, parents, foreign domestic helpers, and teachers; and the influence of foreign domestic helpers on children's development. Studies by Eupen, Yunis, Zoubeidi and Sabri (2004) and Roumani (2005) observed that the involvement of housemaids in childcare in the UAE increased the risk of behavioral problems among three-year-old children and had harmful effects on their social and emotional development which reflected social change factors and conflict between cultures. Likewise, Jabbar's (2014) study revealed psychological problems among 4–5-year-old Jordanian children, because the roles of mothers and maids were not clearly delineated. In Saudi Arabia, Al-Matary and Aljohani (2021) indicated that growing up with housemaids affected adolescents' dependency on the housemaid and driver and effected their attitude and behaviour.

Comparisons between housemaids and nurseries in Zimbabwe, Matangi, Kashora, Mhlanga, and Musiyiwa (2013) found that nurseries outweighed housemaids favorably in all aspects of child development except on their natural development, personality, and space requirements. In addition, nurseries promoted foreign language use by children whilst housemaids promoted local languages.

Another group of studies investigated the influence of housemaids on children's academic performance. In Singapore, Cheo and Quah (2005) compared the effects of mothers, maids and tutors on children's course grades. The researchers concluded that children's academic performance depends on the number of qualitative benefits they receive in the home environment rather than their choice of time use. Primarily, the influence of a mother's choice to work, the presence of a domestic helper or a tutor and the effects of different investment strategies to instil qualitative attributes in children affect their course grades. Filipino foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong improve the educational outcomes of school children by decreasing the probability of their late schooling or increasing their scores of core academic subjects. Filipino foreign domestic workers' English-speaking skill and their maturity were found to be the most important factors in improving children's educational outcomes (Tang & Yung, 2016).

In two other studies in Hong Kong, Lam, Loh and Tse (2007) and Tse, Lam, Loh, Ip, Lam, and Chan (2009), results of tests and surveys revealed a relationship between the language used by foreign domestic helpers and parents and the children's English reading achievement. Foreign domestic helpers who generally speak English provide children with an opportunity to practice and speak English in early life. The researchers also found a statistically significant relationships between reading achievement and whether the child has an English-speaking domestic helper at home, and a

statistically significant difference in reading development between children who have an English-speaking domestic helper and those who do not. English-speaking domestic helpers tend to have a stronger effect on children's performance on English reading tests than children's parents.

Moreover, English-speaking foreign domestic workers, in working-mothers' households increase children's likelihood of speaking English by 25% if the mother speaks English, and by 12% if the mother does not speak English, whereas non-English-speaking foreign domestic workers have little effect on speaking English. Age and education are two variables of English-speaking migrant domestic helpers that are significantly associated with improvements in children's English-speaking ability and their English school subject (Tang, 2018).

On the contrary, no differences were found between kindergarten, and secondary school students who have a foreign domestic helper and students who do not in their ability to listen to British, American, and Hong Kong English, and are better at listening to the Filipino English accent than those who do not have a maid. Being familiar with another variety of English is a desirable outcome given that English is used as a lingua franca among non-native speakers on a daily basis (Leung, 2012).

As for the effects of foreign domestic helpers on first (L1) and second language (L2) acquisition, Dulay, Tong and McBride (2017) compared three groups of children: a group of native Cantonese-speaking children in Hong Kong with English-speaking foreign domestic helpers learning Chinese character recognition, Chinese vocabulary, English word reading and English vocabulary among; a second group of children with Cantonese-speaking foreign domestic helpers, and a third group with no foreign domestic helpers who were spoken to in Cantonese. Results showed potential advantages in initial English vocabulary and disadvantages in initial Chinese character recognition among children in the English-speaking foreign domestic helper group, with no evidence for compounding or diminished benefits over time.

In Indonesia, children learn to speak Bahasa Indonesia as their first language. However, their language is not a pure and a straightforward Bahasa Indonesian language. Rather, it is a mixture of Bahasa Indonesia and Javanese. The Javanese variety they speak is somehow different from the standard Wonosobo Javanese in Central Java. There are lexical items spoken only in areas from which their housemaids come from. The Javanese variety spoken by the housemaids is different from the Javanese variety spoken by most people of the Kenteng locality in Central Java, which is the standard Javanese variety in Wonosobo. Differences in the lexical items, sounds, and intonation were found. Apparently, the Javanese, that the children speak, is influenced by that of their housemaids (Christina, 2013).

In Pakistan, Moazzam and Haroon (2019) reported that children imitate the housemaids' accent which is usually very bad. Those housemaids come from different backgrounds, and their pronunciation is also different. In the same way, when housemaids are educated and well informed, their linguistic influence on the children will be good. Sometimes housemaids are illiterate and speak different

languages such as Punjabi and the children imitate the Punjabi accent of the housemaid and acquire vocabulary from the housemaid's language. Similarly, Omani children mix words from the housemaid's language with Arabic words, in addition to the incorrect pronunciation of some Arabic phonemes. However, maids have a weak influence on number discrimination by children and does not delay speaking in Arabic in older children (Al Muntheri, 2013). In Jordan, children ages 4-5 years have speech problems due to the interaction with their housemaids (Jabbar, 2014).

Despite the importance of studies investigating the influence of foreign housemaids on children's emotional, social and linguistic development in numerous countries, there is lack of studies in Saudi Arabia that explore the influence of housemaids on children's Arabic language acquisition, especially children under the age of six. To fill in this gap, this study aims to answer the following questions: (i) What role do foreign housemaids play in Saudi young children's acquisition of Arabic especially pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary? (ii) What factors contribute to the negative or positive influence of the housemaids' language on the children' acquisition of Arabic?

Furthermore, the study will report the frequency of children under age six per family, i.e., per household, the working status of mothers, the frequency of maids per household, the housemaids' nationality, educational level and native language, the language spoken by the housemaids upon arrival in Saudi Arabia, degree of Arabic language intelligibility a year later and the housemaids' proficiency level in Arabic two years after arrival in Saudi Arabia.

The study will not focus on the influence of housemaids on Saudi children's emotional, social, and academic achievement at school. It will not focus on written Arabic, i.e., reading, writing nor children's achievement in Arabic. It will only focus on spoken Arabic, i.e., Colloquial Arabic. It will be based on interviews with a sample of mothers and results will be reported from the perspective of mothers. No interviews will be held with the children nor housemaids. No Arabic language tests will be given to the children nor the housemaids to assess their proficiency level or linguistic competence as this is beyond the scope of the study and administration of such a test is not possible.

This study is significant as it will shed light on first language acquisition at home by children under the age of six and how interaction and communication with foreign housemaids at home might have a negative or positive effect on children's linguistic development in Arabic. It will give parents some recommendation on how they might enhance their young children's Arabic language acquisition and how the negative effects of the housemaids on young children can be avoided or reduced.

2. DATA COLLECTION

2.1 Samples

2.1.1 Mothers' Sample

A sample of 300 mothers were randomly selected from those visiting an amusement park in Riyadh. Only mothers with children under the age of six were selected. Analysis of the demographic data of the mothers showed the following:

- 67% of sample are working and 33% are non-working (stay-home) mothers.
- 5% of the mothers have a Ph.D., 21% have an MA, 62% have a B.A., and 12% have a high school degree.
- 63% of the households have one housemaid, 24% have two housemaids, 8% have three housemaids and 5% have four housemaids.

2.1.2 The Children's Sample

Mothers in the sample have a total of 498 children between the ages of two and a half and six years old. 40% of the children go to kindergarten, and preschool. 48% of the households have 1 child; 39% have 2 children and 13% have 3 children under the age of six.

2.1.3 The Housemaids' Sample

Mothers in the sample have a total of 465 foreign housemaids and nannies. Households with Arab housemaids were excluded. Analysis of the demographic data of the housemaids showed the following:

- *Maids' nationality:* 54% of the maids in the sample are Indonesian, 19% are Sri Lankan, 11% are Filipino, 2% are Eritrean and 2% are Indian.
- *Maids' educational level:* 7% are illiterate; 12% read and write, 43% completed their elementary school education, 28% completed junior high school; 5% completed high school and 5% have a college degree.
- *Maids' Native Language:* 54% speak Indonesian; 18% speak Sri Lankan; 11% speak Tagalog; 2% speak Eritrean; 2% speak Hindi; 10% speak English and 3% speak Arabic in addition to their native language.
- Upon arrival in the Kingdom, 3% of the sample speak Arabic from previous work experience in the Kingdom, 10% speak

English such as Filipino maids in addition to their native language (Tagalog), and 87% speak their native language only.

Housemaids stay for two years, i.e., they are recruited for a two-year contract. Every two years, one housemaid goes and another one comes. In some cases, the contract of the same made is renewed and thus she works longer at the same household.

2.2 Instruments

Face to face interviews with open-ended questions were used with the mothers. Interview questions focused on obtaining demographic data about the mothers, children and housemaids such as the

working status of mothers; educational level of mothers; number of children under the age of six in the household; number of housemaids working in the household; housemaids' nationality; housemaids' educational level; housemaids' native language; language spoken by maids upon arrival in Saudi Arabia; degree of Arabic language intelligibility a year after arrival in Saudi Arabia; housemaids' proficiency level in Arabic two years after arrival; characteristics of the housemaids' spoken Arabic; examples of housemaids' non-standard Arabic vocabulary; faulty pronunciation and structures; and the negative or positive influence of the housemaids on the Arabic language acquisition by you children under the age of six and how the housemaids impact the children's language development while growing older and going to kindergarten and school.

2.3 Data Analysis

Mothers' responses to the interview questions were categorized according to the questions included in the of interview the study. The responses are reported quantitatively and qualitatively. Where applicable, responses are reported in percentages.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Characteristics of Foreign Housemaids' Arabic

Upon arrival in Saudi Arabia, most foreign housemaids' do not speak Arabic, and few speak English. Mothers' responses showed that upon arrival in the Kingdom, 3% of the housemaids speak Arabic from previous work experience in the Kingdom; 10% speak English such as Filipino housemaids in addition to their native language (Tagalog); and 87% speak their native language only. Those who speak English, speak it with a non-native accent. All maids regardless of their nationality, educational level, and native language pick up the colloquial Arabic form spoken by family members among whom they live, i.e., they learn by immersion). They do not learn to read no write Arabic. A year after arrival, mothers added that 8% of the housemaids have a very intelligible speech in Arabic; 44% have a somewhat intelligible speech; 32% have a little intelligible speech and 16% have an unintelligible speech. Two years after arrival, the maids' proficiency level in spoken Arabic is as follows: 14% have an excellent command of Arabic; 52% have a good command; 32% have a fair command; and 2% have a poor command of Arabic.

The mothers added that the housemaids' spoken Arabic is characterized by incorrect pronunciation and sentence structures and limited vocabulary knowledge. They have difficulty producing certain Arabic phonemes such as: ث ح ذ ش ص ض ط ظ ع غ ق. In vocabulary, they use slang forms that are not used by native speakers such as: *sadeeg*, *ma'loom*, *seeda*, *girgir*, *jeldi*, *miyya miyya* (perfect 100%) جيب، ودي، يجي، روح. In grammar, they produce incomplete sentences, reverse word order, use faulty plural forms such as using the singular instead of the plural, confusing masculine, and feminine genders, use faulty gender agreement in verbs and adjectives, misuse subjective and objective pronoun forms, and use one negative particle /maa/. /mas fi maaloom/, /maa fi ?ana sawwii/ (See Table 1 for detailed examples).

Table 1: Linguistic Weakness with Incorrect forms and Their Native Equivalent

Maids' Linguistic Weaknesses	Faulty form	Correct form
Faulty pronunciation and production of phonemes	س، ز، أ، هـ، ك هازا كلاص مدام سكرا، اسنري، سننثة رياز gurfa اين	ث ح ذ ش ص ط ظ ع غ ق هذا خلاص مدام شكرا، اسنري، سننثة رياض غرفة عين
Deletion of prepositions	أنا يروح سيارة	أروح بالسيارة
Deletion of definite article	مفتاح بيت ودي مدرسة يروه سوق اجيب سيارة	مفتاح البيت ودي المدرسة يروح السوق اجيب السيارة
No adverbs of place	أنا في مدرسة	أنا عند المدرسة، قدام المدرسة
Use of I (?ana) pronouns	انا يروه سيارة	انا اروح بالسيارة
No feminine and plural pronouns. They use of masculine, singular "you" (?inta)	أنت يعرف واحد نفر سوي انت يجي انت يروه انت معلوم	هل تعرف شخص يعمل كذا One pronoun form for feminine and masculine singular and plural.
Faulty plural	نفر نفرات	انفار
No clitic/attached pronouns	أنا أكلم انت	أكلمك
Problem of using past and present tenses	انا في يروح الحين انا في يروح أمس أنا في يروح بكرة أنا فيه يروح الحين انت يروح الحين بابا في يروح ماما يسوي كلام هو فيه كلام أول ما في عربي	انا سأذهب الآن انا رحنت (ذهبت) بالأمس انا سأذهب غدا أنا سأذهب الآن اذهب الآن بابا يذهب ماما تقول او ماما قالت فلان قال كذا (في الماضي) لا اعرف (لا اتحدث) اللغة العربية
Use of ما في /ma fiy/ for negatives	ما في يقول ما في سافر ما في موجود ما في معلوم انا ما في سوي	لم يقل، ما قال ما سافر، ما اسافر لا أحد موجود – غير موجود لا اعرف أنا لم افعل/ أما ما فعلت
Possessive forms	بيت مال بابا بيت مال اخو أنا بيت اختي ماما أكل حق أنا	بيت ماما أي بيت صاحبة البيت بيت اخي بيت اخت ماما (اخت صاحبة البيت) أكلي (الأكل الخاص بي)
Mixing English & Arabic	سالري مال أنا	راتبي

	<p>عفش حق كيتشن مرض حق هوم انت قو وأنا بعدين أنا سوي كول سليم سليم أنا يسوي كوبي</p>	<p>عفش المطبخ (أدوات المطبخ) الحنين الى الوطن homesick انت اذهب وأنا سأصل بك لاحقاً Same same (similar) أنا سأعمل كوفي (قهوة)، هل اعمل كوفي</p>
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3.2 Influence of House Maids on Children’s Arabic (L1) Acquisition

Analysis of the mothers’ responses to the interview questions showed that almost half the children in the sample imitate the housemaid all the time and one third imitate her sometimes particularly when they first start to speak Arabic at age two and three. As a result, children in this group cannot produce Arabic phonemes correctly, make mistakes in plural formation and gender assignment but this is natural in first language acquisition even if the family does not have a housemaid. Some children speak two forms of Arabic: one with the housemaid and the other with their parents and siblings. Few more children learn to speak the housemaid’s native language. Some mothers said:

Fatima: *When my daughter was six, she used to imitate the maid in the way she speaks Arabic.*

Nadia: *My maid used to teach my son how to speak her language. She would record her voice so that my son listens to it and learn her language and does not forget.*

Dalal: *When my children went to kindergarten, they corrected their Arabic pronunciation and grammar.*

Aisha: *When the maid first arrived and did not speak any Arabic, my daughter used to communicate with her in sign language.*

Furthermore, Table 1 shows that 80% of the children under the age of six in the sample always/sometimes imitate the housemaid’s pronunciation; 53% always/sometimes use the housemaid’s vocabulary; 42% always/sometimes imitate the housemaid’s grammatical structures; 20% always/sometimes use unintelligible words; 22% always/sometimes use sign language; and 12% have language disorders.

Table 2: Influence of Housemaids on Young Children’s Arabic Acquisition

Children’s Linguistic Behaviour	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	NA
• Imitate maid’s pronunciation	47%	33%	14%	6%
• Use maid’s vocabulary	22%	31%	22%	25%
• Use maid’s grammar	19%	23%	24%	34%
• Use unintelligible words	4%	16%	27%	53%
• Use sign language	5%	17%	28%	50%
• Have language disorders	4%	8%	9%	79%

The mothers' responses revealed that the housemaid's influence on young children's spoken Arabic depends on: how much time the child spends with the housemaid, how much time the mother spends with the child, and whether the child has siblings, and playmates. When the child goes to kindergarten, traces of a foreign accent resulting from imitating the housemaid's foreign Arabic accent and faulty use of Arabic disappear, and the child is able to speak Arabic correctly and natively. Watching cartoons on T.V. also improves the children's Arabic language. Some mothers asserted:

Maryam: The housemaid's Arabic had no negative influence on the child's Arabic language development because Arabic is the dominant language around children. The children interact with people around them such as family members, relatives, and neighbours who speak Arabic natively.

Nadia: When my son mispronounces a word, I correct him right away.

Hana: My child spends a lot of time with the maid, because when I get home from work, I am usually tired and need to rest.

4. DISCUSSION

The current study investigated the influence of foreign housemaids on the acquisition of spoken Arabic by young children under the age of six. The study did not investigate the effects of English-speaking foreign housemaids on children's academic achievement or English language skill development as in studies by Cheo and Quah (2005), Lam, Loh and Tse (2007) and Tse, Lam, Loh, Ip, Lam and Chan (2009), Leung (2012), Tang and Yung (2016), Dulay, Tong and McBride (2017), and Tang (2018). Likewise, the current study did not explore the effects of speaking a different variety of the same language by the housemaids on children who speak another variety as in studies by Christina (2013) in Indonesia and Moazzam and Haroon (2019) in Pakistan.

In addition, results of the current study are contradictory with findings of Matangi, Kashora, Mhlanga, and Musiyiwa's (2013) study in Zimbabwe which indicated that nurseries promoted foreign language use in children whilst housemaids promoted local languages. In the current study, housemaids did not promote the local language which is Arabic in this study and nurseries promoted Arabic language development in children, not the foreign language, as foreign/second language acquisition was not the focus of the present study.

Results of the present study are consistent with results of prior studies by Al Muntheri (2013) in Oman and Jabbar (2014) in Jordan. Omani children mix words from the housemaid's language with Arabic words and show incorrect pronunciation of some Arabic phonemes compared to 53% of the children in the current study who mix the maids' vocabulary all the time or part of the time and 80% of the children who mispronounce Arabic words all the time or part sometimes. In Jordan, children ages four and five years have speech problems due to interaction with their housemaids. In this study, 12% of young children in the sample have language disorders, 20% use unintelligible words and 22% use sign

language. The housemaids do not delay speaking in Arabic in older children in Oman. Likewise, young children in the current study learn to speak Arabic correctly and fluently once they go to kindergarten and elementary school.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Analysis of the mothers' responses to the interview questions has shown some influence of foreign housemaids on Arabic language acquisition by children under the age of six. Since those children are raised by the foreign housemaid since they were babies, are emotionally attached to them and they spend their active time with them, the influence of the maids' language is inevitable. To reduce the negative effects of the housemaid's faulty spoken Arabic on children's language, this study recommends the following:

- The acquisition of the native language, vis Arabic by young children is not automatic. It requires time, effort, interaction, communication, an enriching environment, and guidance from native speakers around the children (Al-Jarf, 2020b).
- Parents should read Arabic stories to their young children and encourage them to speak and express themselves freely and give them a chance to talk about pictures and toys in Arabic. They can also teach children Arabic songs as these will be easy to memorize and thus the child will memorize the vocabulary and structures in the songs (Al-Jarf, 2016; Al-Jarf, 2015).
- Parents should follow up children's linguistic development and note inconsistencies and abnormalities, try to fix them and seek professional help when necessary.
- Children can use Arabic mobile apps and Arabic language learning websites to learn the Arabic alphabet, numbers, names of animals, colors, fruits, seasons, continents, and so on. They can learn Arabic from games, cartoons, movies, nursery rhymes, stories, flashcards, and YouTube videos (Al-Jarf, 2021a; Al-Jarf, 2021b; Al-Jarf, 2020a; Al-Jarf, 2004).
- While communicating and interacting with a housemaid, parents should respond to her in correct native Arabic not in the hybrid way she speaks, so that she improves her Arabic.
- Mothers should carefully select housemaids, define their duties precisely, and monitor their interaction with the children. They should not delegate all child-caring tasks to their housemaids (Jabbar, 2014). With some time-management skills, mothers can take care of the children and follow up their linguistic development better.
- Raising the community's awareness, in collaboration with various media and social media, of the dangers of the housemaid's impact on young children's first language acquisition. It is important to promote the role of the nursery and kindergarten teachers in treating any abnormalities in young children's speech by creating an appropriate educational environment for them (Al Muntheri, 2013)

Finally, the current study recommends that future researchers in Saudi Arabia investigate the effect of foreign housemaids who speak English on second language acquisition (English) by young children under the age of six. Comparisons of the influence of foreign housemaids on children's L1 and L2

before the school age and after the children go to school, in addition to the housemaids' effect on older children's academic achievement in L1 and L2, specially in speaking, reading, and writing, is still open for further investigation in the future.

Declaration of conflicting interest

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